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AUTHOR Duke, Charles R.
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ABSTRACT

Teachers should be making every effort to use approaches for teaching literature that encourage students to discover the meaning of a text for themselves, using the language of the text and without unnecessary teacher intervention. Therefore, rather than having the students be led by the teacher/interpreter through a work they encounter the first time, they should become actively engaged by knowing that they are going to have to explain their reading to others who have read the same text but may not have seen the same things. Starting with the so-called "gut" reaction, which contains many bits and pieces from which meaning can gradually emerge, students can be encouraged to keep journals to record their responses along general guidelines or question sets. Journal entries then can be used to generate discussion in class or used in later essays as the nuclei of key ideas. After they become comfortable with the initial observations and reactions recorded in the journal, students should be encouraged to read a work closely and make observations about what they discover. Oral reading of both poetry and prose can show students that slow reading will help them learn and interpret the language of the text, and that personal observation will also help them range over the text in a nonlinear fashion. Such a process of making meaning takes time, but to enable students to uncover the possibility for enjoyment of reading and the importance of making meaning for themselves from their reading, is worth the risk and effort. (CRH)

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Charles R. Duke
Department of English
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky 42071

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Literature and the Making of Meaning

Students often tell their teachers that the works read for classroom study seem to be written in a foreign language. The comment is often uncomfortably appropriate, for students frequently are visitors in what to them appears to be a strange land--the text.

Many of today's literature classes are like trips in a foreign country; the teacher/interpreter leads the way, pointing out the significant sights, perhaps adding some footnotes here and there of interesting, even quaint, facts and anecdotes. Students may be attentive visitors but once the trip is over, they promptly forget where they have been and why they were there. Most literature teachers know that students would get much more from their literary travels if they encountered the language of the text directly and ultimately came to speak the language without heavy reliance on an accommodating interpreter. The irony of this comparison is that being turned loose in a foreign country where you do not know the language can be a frightening, even harrowing, experience on occasion, but within the classroom, travels in the uncharted territory of a text should be undertaken without fear of failure or disaster.

We should be making every effort to use approaches for teaching literature which encourage students to discover the meaning of a

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text for themselves. After all, isn't one of our major goals as teachers of literature to make the language of the text the student's and from that language build meaning? The implication for the classroom, then, is obvious. Students should have the opportunity to encounter a work directly without unnecessary teacher intervention. Ah, but we already do that, you say, when we ask students to read before we discuss. Quite so, except that most of our students have been conditioned to expect that whether or not they read, the interpreter/teacher will be there to explain all the strange sights along the way. It is at this point that we must make some changes so that when students encounter a work for the first time, they become actively engaged and know that they are going to have to explain their journey to others who have been on the same trek but may not have seen the same things.

An active reader can be counted upon to respond in some way to whatever is read. This initial response, however, is usually a private one. We sometimes refer to it as the "gut reaction" and dismiss it as not worthy of discussion; yet within such gut reactions lie the bits and pieces from which meaning can gradually emerge. For that reason, we must not overlook this stage in the reading process. These initial responses will be more valuable if students can be encouraged to record them in some way.[1] The most common approach is through the journal, an activity that is used with good success in writing classes and which has an equally good track record in literature classes if used appropriately. Students not familiar with the process of recording their initial reactions

to reading might profit from having some general guidelines such as the following to use as starting points:

1. What about the reading pleases you?
2. What about the reading displeases you?
3. What in the reading confuses you?
4. What do you remember after completing the reading?
5. What in the reading surprised you?
6. What did the reading remind you of in your own life?
7. What, if anything, did you learn from your reading?
8. What did you already know that the reading reinforced for you?
9. What else would you like to know that the reading did not provide?
10. What else have you read or seen that is like or unlike this work?

Students do not have to respond to all of these questions each time they read; in fact, as soon as possible, they should be encouraged to leave the guide questions and simply talk about what happens as they read; they may be encouraged to record these responses as they go, or complete them after the reading is done. At no time should students be given the impression, however, that they are writing a test essay or that they have to produce an interpretation of the work.

Here, for example, is a student commenting on his reading of Hemingway's A FAREWELL TO ARMS: "I can't really understand why it

rained all the time in the story. Everytime something happened it rained." Another student comments on Fitzgerald's THE GREAT GATSBY: "Boy, the story line jumps about. One minute he talks about Daisy and Gatsby, then, there's a conversation between Jordan and himself, then he jumps back to the garage. Why does the story jump around this way?"[2] Not infrequently, the journal entries become quite personal. One seventh grader after having read a selection from James Agee's DEATH IN THE FAMILY which described how Rufus, a teenage boy, involuntarily grinned when he thought of his father's death, wrote the following journal entry:

> The thing that gets me is I can't go to a funeral. I can't face the people or the person in the casket. I saw my Aunt Pat in her casket at the funeral home and she looked pale and I thought to myself, "This is all a joke, it can't be true! It just can't!" I touched her face and she was stiff and cold. Not warm and snuggly like she used to be. And then I laughed. I think now that I went crazy for a minute literally![3]

Such excerpts, of course, may serve as the initial catalyst for discussing a work or they may be reserved for later use, perhaps in an essay discussing a work in terms of both the personal and the objective response. Encouraged to record their reactions in journals, students will become more comfortable with the idea that initial responses tend to be tentative, that they are merely parts of an overall exploration to arrive at meaning. Having recorded their early responses, students may then be prepared to move to

closer observation of their reading.

At this point in our search for meaning, we have reached what Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen in BEAT NOT THE POOR DESK (Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1982) call "learning to read the language of the work." Students at this stage concentrate on reading the work closely and making observations about what they discover. Using poetry to introduce this process works particularly well. The emphasis here needs to be on slow reading; ideally we might want students to memorize the poem as a means of helping them internalize the lines. This is impractical in most cases, but since students tend to skim poetry and read prose more slowly, rather drastic steps may need to be taken initially to encourage the slow reading. Try, for example, the following: Write a poem of 10 to 15 lines on the chalkboard in clear, large block letters (an overhead transparency works equally well). Call upon the class to read the poem aloud without any effort to memorize it; then erase a few unimportant letters on each line. Ask the class to read the poem aloud again, even though some of the letters are absent. Repeat this process several times, each time erasing a few more letters and then whole words and phrases, until the poem disappears. At each reading the students should easily fill in the missing words or letters. After seven or eight readings, the students should see no text but still "see" it. As a result of this experience, most students will grasp the significance of the concentration involved in reading and understand more fully what you mean when you talk about a "slow" reading of the poem. Participation is a key element in

understanding close reading, and the oral response heightens the pleasure of the experience. Since effective learning depends upon focusing attention on a task and then developing a purpose for that attention, time spent on such an exercise is not wasted.

Learning the language of the work should not be rushed; most teachers tend to be too eager to "get to the point" and interpret, but the focus here is on learning how to read and study a work. Because students tend to think that a "slow" reading is the mark of a poor reader, we need to show them that such is not necessarily the case. If we are patient, students will discover that reading and speaking the language of the work are much easier than trying to interpret it, but that when the time comes for interpretation, the effort spent in learning the language will help immensely.

Students, after a "slow" reading experience, which might consist of three or four oral readings of a piece, should be ready to offer a descriptive response; this focuses on the surface features of the work or the "language." The response may be either oral or written, but most students will need assistance in understanding that they are only to describe what they find, not provide interpretations of their findings. Observation is a personal activity, of course, but in this case the observer should expect to share findings. Such findings will range from the most obvious to the most obscure but they will tend to be rendered with some degree of excitement as the process of discovering meaning continues. The sharing of these responses begins the analysis of the work, but the teacher should resist the temptation to direct

traffic--"note the pun in the second line." Because the observations will be personal, students will range over and through the work, helping to break down the temptation to always treat a work in linear fashion because that's the way it appears on the page. Eventually the student, if called upon to express meaning for an audience in a structured way, will tend to develop the personal order so that it contributes to others' understanding of meaning in the work.

As students begin this stage of their response, it may be helpful to provide some guidelines about what constitutes observations.[4]

1. Observations are concrete--something that you can see that others can see as well.
2. Observations are what you notice--what strikes you as you read and re-read or after you leave the work.
3. What you notice may seem "obvious"--that's fine because the obvious is always important; it is often something we all have taken for granted; recording the obvious is a good way to begin your observations.
4. To express observations, you'll be using the language of description; you may comment on the kinds of verbs a writer uses; the choice of pronouns; the shift in verb tenses; long sentences vs. short sentences; these are only some of the items you might discover; don't worry if you know the names of what you find; simply describe so others will know what you are seeing. You may not be looking for verbs; instead,

you may observe what kinds of repetitions there are or how abstract some parts are while others are concrete. Simply describe what you find.

If students are unfamiliar with close observation, you may want to omit the suggestions in item 4 and concentrate on the first three areas until students feel comfortable with the process of using the language of the work they are reading. In most cases, students will find the grammatical and rhetorical aspects without much prodding, but it is important they do this primarily on their own; the immediacy of the personal discovery and the sharing of it, orally or in writing, are part of the making of meaning for a work. Students who are being introduced to this process should record their observations for ten or fifteen minutes without referring directly to the work being read. The teacher should do the same. No instructions for order or sequence need be given; let everyone record what can be remembered from observation. At first, students will find this step most difficult and will want to keep returning to the text. Encourage them not to. Suggest that they need to have confidence in their memories; again, short poems work best during early experiences with this approach.

Once the observations have been recorded, the sharing should begin. Encourage each student to share a written observation; the results usually provide a mixture of sharp, specific observation and impressionistic reaction--"It wasn't very interesting" translates to " I wasn't involved with the work." It will also be necessary on occasion to remind students of what was originally characterized as

an observation. If the observer cannot point to a "fact" in the work that is the observation, then the response is not appropriate at this stage.

The sharing will lead to considerable talk; students should be encouraged to challenge each other, ask for clarification, seek additional observations and generally become involved. However, during the sharing, it may become evident that everyone would profit from another reading and then recording of observations to augment those already discovered. The talk can be interrupted for this purpose several times if the need arises. The hard part here is not to overdirect. Because some classes will appear to veer away from the work, some gentle prodding to re-direct the observation may be necessary, but it should be done as unobtrusively as possible. The same thing may happen when students come close to discovering a concept the teacher feels is vital to an understanding of the work; again, patience and avoiding Socratic dialogue will be important. Students tend not to really experience a work by relying heavily on someone else's perspective. Often enough the apparent digression leads to real discovery but from a vantage point that might never have occurred to us.

At this point, then, we may have done enough. Through the initial responding via the journal, then the close reading and observing coupled with the sharing, we may have provided ample opportunity for students to make meaning from the text. At other times, we may wish to have students develop their meanings into written commentary that can be read and responded to by both peers

and the teacher. If the process of observation and responding has been followed thoroughly, and students have been faithful in recording their discoveries, the shaping of meaning and the order of presentation for that meaning should follow fairly naturally and easily. Certainly students familiar with the process of prewriting, writing and rewriting should feel quite comfortable with dipping into their notes and reactions to shape a central meaning.

Such a process of making meaning takes time; yet our traditional rush to "cover" literature has done just that--covered the content of the course, but not uncovered the possibility for enjoyment of reading and for letting students discover the importance of making meaning for themselves from what is read. The latter seems to be a more worthwhile and lasting goal than the number of poems read or the number of pages assigned during the marking period.

If we are willing, then, to risk letting students loose in the world of the text to discover meaning, we should find an increasing number of confident, even eager, readers and writers who look forward to the challenge of making meaning each time a new text appears.

Notes

[1]See Charles R. Duke, "How Did You Like It? The Question of Student Response and Literature," Kentucky English Bulletin (Fall 1982), 19-29.

[2]Excerpts taken from students' reading process journals at Shoreham-Wading River High School, Shoreham, NY; teacher: Audre Allison.

[3]Excerpt from student's reading process journal at Lone Oak Middle School, Paducah, KY; teacher: Jolane Strickland.

[4]Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen. Beat Not the Poor Desk (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1982), 162-164.